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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 000522

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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/SE

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KIRF](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [OSCE](#) [TU](#)

SUBJECT: TURKISH YOUTH ARRESTED FOR MURDER OF CATHOLIC
PRIEST

REF: A. 05 ANKARA 1511

[1](#)B. 05 ANKARA 814

[1](#)C. 05 ANKARA 1935

[1](#)D. ANKARA 500

Classified by DCM Nancy McEldowney; reasons 1.4 b and d.

[1](#)1. (U) Summary: Turkish police have arrested a 16-year-old suspected in the murder of a Catholic priest in Trabzon. Politicians and pundits have speculated about the motive behind the killing, but as yet there are no hard facts. Some Christians in Turkey believe the killing is related to worldwide religious conflict, including the furor over the cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed, and say Christians are often threatened in Trabzon. GOT leaders have condemned the killing and offered support to the investigation. There has been an increase in threats against Christians, vandalism of churches, and anti-Christian media coverage in Turkey over the past year. End Summary.

Police Arrest Teenage Suspect

[1](#)2. (U) Turkish police on February 7 arrested a 16-year-old suspected of killing Catholic Priest Andrea Santoro in the Black Sea city of Trabzon. An assailant shot Santoro, a 61-year-old Italian, from behind on February 5 as he was praying in the Church of Santa Maria. Witnesses reported that the gunman shouted "God is great" before firing his weapon. Police reportedly found the gun used in the murder in the house where they captured the suspect, who is a local high school student. Media have also pointed to the growing problem of youth gangs in Trabzon, many of whose members are armed. Trabzon is also a nexus for trade with Russia and other countries of the FSU.

Wide Speculation on Motive

[1](#)3. (U) The motive for the shooting remains unclear; media pundits and politicians have filled the void with wide-ranging speculation. Popular theories include:

-- The killer was enraged over the publication of the caricatures of the Prophet Mohammed.

-- Santoro was killed because of his "missionary work."
(Note: Although proselytizing is legal in Turkey, it is highly controversial, and missionaries are often threatened. However, the Catholic Church does not normally engage in missionary activities. End Note.)

-- Santoro worked to rescue women from prostitution and trafficking, and was killed by organized crime figures involved in prostitution in Trabzon.

-- The murder could be tied to a personal conflict unrelated to religion. During a February 6 Cabinet meeting, ministers reportedly speculated that Santoro might have been involved in an affair with a woman (although there is no evidence of this).

¶4. (U) Christian leaders in Turkey told us they believe the shooting is a consequence of worldwide religious conflict and the deep hostility toward Christianity felt by some conservative Muslims in Turkey. Papal Nuncio Edmond Farhat and Monsignor Luigi Padovese, apostolic vicar of Anatolia, said Trabzon residents opposed to the presence of a Catholic church in their city had repeatedly threatened Santoro. Ihsan Ozbek, a pastor and president of the Union of Protestant Churches of Turkey, told us that Protestants in Trabzon also frequently face threats. He said that in January, assailants beat a Protestant pastor and several of his followers in the city.

¶5. (U) Padovese said two witnesses described the killer as an adult, contradicting the police claim that a teenager carried

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out the attack.

GOT, Press Condemn Murder

¶6. (U) GOT leaders have repeatedly denounced the murder. PM Erdogan told MPs on February 7 that "we vehemently condemn this attack," and offered condolences to Santoro's family and parishioners. On February 6, Erdogan said that, "nothing about entering a place of worship to kill a priest is acceptable." Ali Bardakoglu, president of the GOT's Religious Affairs Directorate (Diyanet), issued a statement maintaining that, "We strongly condemn the murder of a reverend in his sanctuary regardless of his religious belief. There cannot be any religious, philosophical, or humanistic justification for this brutal killing."

¶7. (SBU) The Turkish press also condemned the killing and raised concerns about the potential damage to Turkey's image. Some commentators, such as Oktay Eksi and Mehmet Yilmaz of the leading daily Hurriyet, blamed the Trabzon governor for failing to provide police protection following the threats against Santoro. They dismissed reports that Santoro did not request protection, averring that the governor should have protected the priest in any case. The Islamist-oriented press tended to promote the theory that Santoro was killed as the result of a personal conflict, in an apparent effort to shift suspicions away from Islamic fundamentalism.

¶8. (U) Luca Sabbatucci, counselor at the Italian Embassy, told us the GOT has been providing excellent cooperation to Italian officials in the case, including to Italian police who are conducting their own investigation of the murder. He said Interior Minister Aksu told Italian authorities he would travel to Trabzon to coordinate the investigation. Sabbatucci also said the GOT provided a military aircraft to transport Santoro's remains to Rome.

¶9. (C) As reported in the 2005 IRF, there has been an increase in threats against Christians and vandalism of churches in Turkey since late 2004, which coincided with an increase in anti-Christian media coverage. The GOT, particularly the Diyanet, has at times exacerbated tensions by issuing alarmist statements about the "threat" of Christian missionary activity (reftels A-C). We do not know -- we may never know -- whether this murder is tied to those broader tensions. Christians in Turkey have feared that attacks against them could escalate, particularly after five assailants severely beat a Protestant Pastor in Adana in January, threatening to kill him if he did not convert to Islam (reftel D). Hurriyet columnist Ahmet Hakan accused GOT leaders of creating an atmosphere of religious hostility. In his February 6 column titled "Now You Did It," Hakan asserted that Turkish officials bear responsibility for the murder because they have sowed public fear over missionaries and religious minorities.

¶10. (C) It is not clear what the political fallout of the murder will be for Turkey. The GOT has been quick to condemn the shooting and offer support to the investigation. This coincides with the GOT's efforts to act as mediator in the conflict over the Prophet Mohammed cartoons. Nevertheless, this murder may be viewed by some in Europe as evidence that Turkey is hostile to Christianity and home to Islamic radicals.

WILSON